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ABSTRACT

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, which was designed to improve student learning, in-school retention, and transition to the workplace, requires the restructuring of secondary education and the extensive involvement of business in preparing youth for the workplace. School-to-work initiatives reflect the conditions of the settings and contexts in which they are introduced. School-to-work initiatives may be characterized as follows: an identifiable formal part of a secondary and/or postsecondary curriculum; active participation of employers; actual or simulated on-the-job experience, and formal or informal certification of skills. Reviews and syntheses of the school-to-work literature have identified the characteristics of effective school-to-work initiatives as they relate to overall system development, partnerships, commitment, funding, guidance, and classroom and worksite activities. Teacher practices that have had a significant effect on students and classrooms have also been identified. Negative attitudes of employers, parents, postsecondary institutions, and teachers toward school-to-work initiatives are among the biggest barriers to successful initiatives. Recommendations for improving school-to-work efforts include the following: recruit enough employers who are willing to provide work-based learning opportunities; give teachers the time, resources, and support required to connect school- and work-based learning; inform parents about the objectives of school-to-work initiatives; and foster high school students' vocational maturity. (MN)

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by Bettina Lankard Brown

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What's Happening in School-to-Work Programs?

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act authorized the allocation of resources for initiatives that would help young people make the transition from school to work. As the implementation of various initiatives is reported in the literature, the literature base related to school-to-work (STW) is rapidly expanding. This *Digest*, based on an ERIC publication (Lewis 1997), presents a summary of the characteristics, principles, and practices of successful school-to-work efforts as synthesized from the literature.

Philosophy Guiding School-to-Work

Today's high-skill job market requires advanced academic knowledge and workplace skills and training, yet young entrants to the work force are not meeting these criteria. According to Lewis (1997), "a substantial number of youth—especially the economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, and the disabled—do not complete high school and are not enrolled in school" (p. 4). Of those who do complete high school, three-quarters enter the work force without bachelor's degrees and many lack the academic and entry-level occupational skills required by their employers (ibid). It is not surprising that their workplace experiences are characterized by high levels of job turnover and unemployment, as well as falling wages. Businesses are bearing extensive costs resulting from the mismatch between school learning and workplace requirements. "It is estimated that American business spends nearly $30 billion training and retraining its work force" (National School-to-Work Learning and Information Center 1996a, p. 2).

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act was designed to improve student learning, in-school retention, and transition to the workplace by improving the quality and relevance of education for all students through experiences that integrate school-based and work-based learning and improve students' knowledge of and access to career opportunities (ibid.). Its implementation requires the restructuring of secondary education and the extensive involvement of business in the work force preparation of youth. Efforts to make the fundamental changes required by the school-to-work legislation have been reported in the literature. Lewis' (1997) paper presents a synthesis of empirical evidence on the conduct and outcomes of such efforts that can be used to guide the implementation of school-to-work initiatives.

Elements and Characteristics of Successful Programs

School-to-work initiatives do not reflect a single model, but rather reflect the conditions of the settings and contexts in which they are introduced. The classification of an initiative as school-to-work may be linked to the following elements identified by Hollenbeck (1996). STW initiatives—

- are an identifiable formal part of a secondary and/or postsecondary curriculum,
- involve active participation of employers,
- involve actual or simulated on-the job experience, and
- result in formal or informal certification of skills.

"The major types of efforts that meet these criteria include apprenticeships, youth or preapprenticeships, techprep education, career academies, cooperative education, school-based enterprises, business-education compacts, employer certified programs, worksite learning, and career exposure programs" (ibid., p. 3). In grades K-8, teachers and counselors provide parents as well as students information about careers and school-to-work opportunities and incorporate academic and vocational integration activities in their classrooms.

In his review and synthesis of the STW literature, Lewis (1997) summarized the characteristics of effective initiatives as they relate to overall system development, partnerships, commitment, funding, guidance, and classroom/worksite activities. The following statements reflect that summary of effective initiatives:

1. They are guided by a comprehensive strategic vision that sets forth the linkages expected at each level of the system.
2. They involve employers in partnership with schools.
3. They require commitment and support at all levels and from all stakeholders—schools, businesses, postsecondary institutions, community partners, and parents.
4. They provide adequate financial support, which often means that a variety of different sources have been developed.
5. They provide students with a strong foundation of career information and a planned sequence of learning experiences throughout their school years that will help them develop an awareness of their own interests, goals, and abilities.
6. They achieve and support the integration of academic and vocational learning.

These characteristics, which offer the basis for educational efforts to support the connection of school-based and work-based learning, are reflected in the following school practices.

Examples of Effective Practices

A variety of innovative practices have been initiated in schools and communities committed to facilitating school-to-work transitions. Some of the teacher practices that have had a significant effect on students and the classroom are described by Cicmanec and Boston (1997) (pp. 1-2):

- Teachers structure classroom activities to integrate academic skills with skills required for successful employment.
- Teachers and counselors provide information about careers and school-to-work opportunities to parents and students and help them make decisions based on their knowledge of the curriculum and students' interests and aptitude.
- Teachers form partnerships with business people, technical workers, and others from the public and private sectors to provide resources and enhance classroom experiences.
- Teachers broaden and deepen their knowledge of various vocations, collaborating with employers to provide contextual learning activities and to set achievable goals for their students.
- Teachers use new ways to assess students' knowledge and skills and to help prepare students to meet state and industry standards.
- School representatives work with others from business, technical and vocational schools, community colleges, universities, nonprofit organizations and government to develop, implement, and assess school-to-work opportunities for their students.

Other effective school-to-work practices are those that provide students with job-related experiences and connect them to the work environment. Through STW efforts that involve job shadowing and mentoring, students learn about job possibilities and conditions of employment. Through volunteer work, internships, and work experiences, students are able to experience the work environment firsthand. Through engagement in work-based learning, students have an opportunity to apply academic knowledge and vocational skills to solve problems of the real world and perform job-related tasks (National School-to-Work Learning and Information Center 1996b).

Although many people have the perception that school-to-work initiatives benefit only those who do not plan to attend college, Bailey and Merritt (1997) point out that such efforts are beneficial to all students—including the college bound—by promoting the following outcomes:

- They help students clarify their personal goals and determine their purposes for going to college.
- They broaden and inform students' choices for careers/jobs.
- They help students develop self-confidence by giving them learning responsibilities and linking them with the broader community outside school.
- They boost students' earning power by giving them some work-based learning experience.
- They offer hands-on learning opportunities to reinforce academic instruction.

Rather than competing with the existing realm of education, STW initiatives complement and enhance education's message by connecting what students learn in school with the application of knowledge in the real world of work. To accomplish this mission, STW initiatives must address certain barriers.

Barriers to Successful Initiatives

Attitude is a major barrier to the success of STW efforts. Some employers lack confidence that their involvement in STW initiatives will be cost effective, reaping them rewards in reduced hiring costs and greater productivity. They are discouraged by the costs of bring students into the organization and allocating time for skilled workers to work with them, by laws regarding child labor and safety, by insurance costs for general liability and workers' compensation, and by management and employee resistance to work-based learning.

Not all parents are receptive to work-based learning. They see one drawback as the need to remove their sons and daughters from the school setting, which is familiar to most parents, and introduce them to the adult workplace. Additionally, many parents perceive that school-to-work initiatives are a threat to academic learning and will draw their children away from college preparation and attendance.

Postsecondary institutions may be reluctant to participate in school-to-work collaboration with high schools because of the increased costs and hassles involved in collaboration efforts. Four-year institutions may shy away from the extra work and collaboration required to recognize school-to-work course work at the college level. In addition, collaboration can pose a threat to institutional control and accountability.

Teacher attitudes also have a great effect on the successful implementation of school-to-work initiatives. Some teachers may be fearful of change and reluctant to devote the time and effort required to learn and incorporate new ways of teaching and learning into their instruction, curriculum, and classroom management.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

To reverse the negative perceptions regarding school-to-work efforts, additional research and more definitive evaluations are required (Bailey and Merritt 1997). A 1996 study by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (Olson 1997) found that employers were willing to take part in STW program approaches ranging from career academies to youth apprenticeships. However, the number of employers and students engaged in the effort was small—9 and 25 respectively. Additionally, the study did not look at student outcomes.

Lewis (1997) made the following recommendations for improving school-to-work efforts:

- *Recruit enough employers who are willing to provide opportunities for work-based learning.* Businesses need evidence that shows the mutual benefits of school-business partnerships.
- *Provide teachers the time, resources, and support required to connect school-based and work-based learning.* Teachers need training and staff development time and opportunities to gain experience with employers, e.g., through externships. They need opportunities to exchange knowledge with all the stakeholders in school-to-work, e.g., students, school administrators, community members, employers, and representatives from postsecondary institutions and four-year colleges.
- *Inform parents about the objectives of school-to-work.* Provide parents with evidence of program effectiveness to counter any erroneous perceptions and assumptions.
- *Foster the vocational maturity of high school students.* Ensure that students are properly prepared to assume work-based learning activities in the workplace. Provide ongoing guidance and counseling.

If the changes called for by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act are to be realized, "an investment much greater than that currently being made will be required from all partners. If this investment is forthcoming, if sound principles are followed, and if the systems are given adequate time to develop, STW can have a major impact on education and the productivity of the U.S. work force" (Lewis 1997, p. 25).

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